

The Threefold Office of Christ: Prophet, Priest, and King

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I. Getting Our Bearings, Going Forward

- The writers of the New Testament expound Christ’s ministry in terms of the three divinely appointed office-bearers of ancient Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures: prophet, priest, and king.
- The name “Christ” means Messiah, or Anointed One. And the three offices in the Hebrew Scriptures which required preliminary anointing were that of prophet, priest, and king.
- To recognize this is to recognize the irreducible “Jewishness” of Christ and his saving work, which is crucial for a biblical understanding of Christology, soteriology, and ecclesiology.
- Ancient Israel’s offices of prophet, priest, and king were *distinguishable* (each possessed its own qualifications and characteristics), *divisible* (each held by different persons), and *abstractable* from the persons who occupied them (each was extrinsic, temporal, and transferable).
- Ancient Israel’s offices of prophet, priest, and king are *not only fulfilled but transformed by Christ*, having been forever joined together and embodied in Christ.

~In Christ we no longer find three separate messianic offices. Rather, we find three distinguishable yet indivisible aspects of *one saving office*.

~As prophet, Christ is messenger and message. As priest, Christ is sacrificer and sacrifice. As king, Christ is victor and victory.

~Here we have an example of theology at its most biblically faithful and pastorally beneficial.

“In order that faith may find a firm basis for salvation in Christ, and thus rest in him, this principle must be laid down: the office enjoined upon Christ by the Father consists of three parts. For he was given to be prophet, king, and priest.” ~John Calvin, *Institutes*



II. Christ Our Prophet...and the Church as Prophetic

- The writers of the New Testament are clear that Jesus is a prophet of Israel, who thus stands in a long line of prophets. Indeed, Peter declares that Jesus is the prophet foretold by Moses.

“Moses said, ‘The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers. You shall listen to him in whatever he tells you.... And all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and those who came after him, also proclaimed these days.’” (Acts 3:22-24; cf. Deuteronomy 18:15-19).

“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (Hebrews 1:1-2).

- Christ is the fullness and culmination of divine revelation. He is the Word of God—the very embodiment of God’s nature, character, and will (John 1:1, 18; Revelation 19:13).
- Christ’s supremacy over the prophets who foreshadowed him is not only a supremacy of *degree*, but also a supremacy of *kind*.

~Christ is himself the fulfillment of divine prophecy, the One to whom the prophets pointed (Luke 4:17-21; Acts 8:26-36)

“And he said to them, ‘O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!’... And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:25-27).

- The ancient prophets spoke *words from and about God*, whereas Christ is *the Word of God in human flesh!*

~The ancient prophets proclaim, “Thus saith the Lord...,” whereas Christ proclaims, “I say unto you...”

~Christ does not bear witness to the Father by pointing directly to the Father. Rather, Christ witnesses to the Father by pointing directly to himself, so that he may be received and known as the visible image of the invisible God.

- Christ is the anointed (messianic) prophet not only for himself, that he might be the church’s sole teacher, but for the whole body, that the power of the Spirit might be present in the church’s ongoing preaching of the gospel.



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~God's people participate in Christ's prophetic office in that the anointing of Christ, the head of the body, is diffused to us, his members (those united to Christ by the Spirit), in order that we too may bear witness to Christ as the invisible image of the invisible God, the fountain of all the Father's gifts (Matthew 28:18-20).

~The Reformers maintained that the Roman church of their day had largely ceased to preach the gospel, yet continued to coin new doctrines, which, in their estimation, showed that Rome did not understand the purpose of Christ's prophetic office, did not hold fast to Christ as its head, and thus could not offer a firm basis for salvation.

III. Christ Our High Priest...and the Church as Priestly

- If the prophetic aspect of Christ's office entails bringing God to us, the priestly aspect entails bringing us to God.
- The priesthood of Christ consists in two things: 1) Christ's once-for-all self-sacrifice; and 2) Christ's ongoing intercession.
- In Christ the priesthood of ancient Israel was not only fulfilled but transformed, as Christ was made both priest and sacrifice. In other words, Christ was made the officiating high priest over his own all-sufficient, and thus once-for-all self-sacrifice (Hebrews 9:11-14, 23-26).
- Christ's priesthood does not end with his once-for-all self-sacrifice, because it follows from the efficacy of Christ's once-for-all self-sacrifice that he is an everlasting intercessor and advocate on our behalf.
- Christ has assumed the role of high priest not only in our place and on our behalf, but also to receive us as his companions in this great priestly office.

~We participate in Christ's priesthood because in him we are set apart (consecrated) and drawn into the very presence of God, so that nothing prohibits our access/nearness to him (John 17; Romans 8:31-39; Hebrews 7:23-25; 10:19-22).

~We participate in Christ's priesthood because in him we may now offer ourselves and our all to God, freely entering the heavenly sanctuary with sacrifices of prayer and praise that is acceptable and sweet-smelling to God (Romans 12:1; Hebrews 13:15-16).

- The Reformers contended that the Roman church of their day misunderstood Christ's priesthood, with far-reaching ramifications.

~Insofar as the Roman Mass was thought to be a re-offering of Christ by a sacrificial, mediatorial Roman priesthood, Rome showed that it was not content with Christ's sole priesthood and once-for-all sacrifice, and thus that it did not hold fast to Christ as its head.



~Insofar as Rome did not grasp the sufficiency and finality of Christ's priesthood, it multiplied mediators (Mary, the cult of saints, the Roman priesthood)—a case in which more is less, in that to add to Christ is to detract from Christ!

IV. Christ Our King...and the Church as Royal

- Christ maintained that his kingdom is not of this world, meaning his kingship is not established on or retained by political and/or military might (John 6:15; 18:36).
- The crucified, exalted Christ now sits at the right hand of the Father in the heavenly realm, having in his possession the whole power of God's dominion (Philippians 2:5-11).
- Christ rules (governs and shepherds) his church, protecting us and bestowing upon us every spiritual good, in accord with the spiritual nature of his kingdom (Ephesians 1:20-22).
- Christ's reign will culminate and be fully manifest when he returns in fulfillment of Davidic kingdom promises (Revelation 19:11-16), at which time we shall reign with (under) Christ, as co-heirs of his kingdom, forevermore—world without end (Revelation 22:5).
- Christ's kingship should embolden the church, so that we might flourish even in our present, embattled situation.

“No matter how many strong enemies plot to overthrow the church, they do not have sufficient strength to prevail over God's immutable decree by which he appointed his Son eternal king [Psalm 89:35-37; 110:1]. Hence it follows that the devil, with all the resources of the world, can never destroy the church, founded as it is on the eternal throne of Christ.”
~John Calvin, *Institutes*

- Christ's kingship should benefit the church by arousing our anticipation, indeed our longing, for the world to come.
- Because Christ's kingship is not of this world, the blessings of that kingship do not consist in outward advantages—a peaceful life, rich possessions, safety from harm, etc. On the contrary, just as our king was afflicted in body and soul before being exalted, so too must we live our present existences under the cross, as it were.
- The blessedness of Christ's people consists in the fact that, by our participation in his kingly office, we partake, even now, in its spiritual benefits. As such, we stand unconquered through the strength of our king, and his spiritual riches abound in us.



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“We may patiently pass through this life with its misery, hunger, cold, contempt, reproaches, and other troubles—content with this one thing: that our king will never leave us destitute, but will provide for our needs until, our warfare ended, we are called to triumph. Such is the nature of his rule, that he shares with us all that he has received from the Father. Now he arms and equips us with his power, adorns us with his beauty and magnificence, enriches us with his wealth. These benefits, then, give us the most fruitful occasion to glory, and also provide us with confidence to struggle fearlessly against the devil, sin, and death. Finally, clothed with his righteousness, we can valiantly rise above the world’s reproaches; and just as he himself freely lavishes his gifts upon us, so may we, in return, bring forth fruit to his glory.” ~John Calvin, *Institutes*